

Parenting



One Tough Job

Building close bonds can help parents

(Editor's note: This is the first in a series of five stories regarding National Child Abuse Prevention Month and the services available in McKean County to help parents through what the McKean County Collaborative Board calls "the toughest job you'll love" — parenthood. Five protective factors have been identified to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. This series identifies and explores those factors.)

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Building a close bond helps parents better communicate with, respond to and understand their child, and the McKean County Collaborative Board can help parents achieve that.

"We might be the first step for moms on their way home from the hospital," explained Kim Martin, director of McKean County Women, Infants and Children Nutrition Program. "We can

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teach moms how to hold their baby and feed them, how to mix formula safely, how to just bond with their baby and love their baby as they're feeding them."

Martin explained WIC also helps by explaining the growth pattern of infants, and sees the parent and child every three months to monitor growth. WIC is a nutrition program, and Martin explained they can act as

a referral service to local food banks or various programs for low-income parents, as well as providing the supplemental nutrition package.

Another area of support WIC can offer is through the "Happiest Baby on the Block" program.

"If you have a baby that's very, very fussy, we can go over steps on soothing that baby," Martin explained.

"Sometimes as the baby is fussy, parents are on the edge and just want the baby to be quiet and they don't know how to do that," Martin explained. "They feel like they are inadequate, where this can show them how to hold the baby and calm them almost instantly."

She explained the program is based on a "five s" approach — swaddle the infant, lay him across your stomach, gently shake or move the baby slightly, "shush" the baby and give them a pacifier to suck.

"You want to swaddle the baby real snug like a little cocoon. You kind of lay your baby on your stomach across your arm and shake gently ... almost like a vibration," she said, warning that shaking too hard can cause injuries to the child, "and then you are going to shush them, say 'shh, shh' as loud as they are crying." And give the baby a pacifier if they will take it.

"I did it with my grandson and my daughter raves over it," Martin said. She added that WIC has tapes and DVDs to loan out to parents to show proper techniques.

"We're talking about having classes on the Happiest Baby so moms know how to do that before they ever deliver," she said.

"Every parent needs support," said Lee Sizemore, director of the Family Centers. "We go from the premise that parenting is tough for everybody. That's why the Family Centers are there, everybody needs support."

"It used to be we had that situation years ago where everybody was in the same community," Martin said, explaining extended families all lived in the same communities. "Girls are off on their own now. Grandma might be a hundred miles away or across the country ... that support system isn't there."

While acknowledging that dads are a good support system, Martin said they are not always in the picture. However, the Family Center has begun to see some different family structures where the mother is the one absent from the picture.

"I see more and more ... single dads," said Gladys LeCourt-Pelka, family development specialist with Bradford Family Center.

"They have the role of bonding with the child," she said. "That support that's available in the community — it's also available to the dads. I think that's important for the dads to know."

"Bonding is sometimes a misleading word," Sizemore said. "A better word is attachment. You're not born with parenting skills. It's a learned process."

"There are different ways for the attachment to build," LeCourt-Pelka said. "The father can talk to the child. There's a different pitch and a different sound to the voice in talking to mom and talking to dad. That's a familiar voice."

"I always tell fathers make sure you talk and sing to your child," LeCourt-Pelka added. "As long as you meet the child's needs, that child is going to build an attachment."

Martin explained that a baby can even feel the difference between being held by Mom or Dad.

"Dad has a different muscle structure in his arm," Martin said. "It's a different thing the baby feels and the baby sometimes quiets right down."

MaryAnne Polucci-Sherman, psychologist with Bradford Recovery Systems, added, "Eye contact is tremendous."

LeCourt-Pelka agreed.

"Children love to look at faces when they start to see," LeCourt-Pelka said. "Bonding occurs with all five senses. If you are looking at a baby face-to-face, it is getting familiar with your face — looking at your eyes, how your mouth looks, learning speech."

"I have a real hard time with parents who want to prop a bottle on a blanket and walk away," she added.

Polucci-Sherman said not being there for a baby during that developmental stage can lead to some problems.

"You can see that with a baby who has no stranger anxiety. They haven't had that recognition of the image," she explained.